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South Korea Attempts to Deal With the Dark Web

After being at the center of a major scandal tied to child pornography, South Korea is taking steps to address the use of the dark web for criminal activity.



By [Troy Stangarone](#)

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Credit: [Pixabay](#)

In October, law enforcement officials in South Korea, the United States, and the United Kingdom announced that over [300 individuals](#) had been arrested in cooperation with 35 other countries in connection with an investigation into a shuttered child pornography site on the dark web. Authorities were able to take down the site by tracing the [bitcoin transactions](#) that were used as payment. They were also able to rescue [23 underage victims](#).

The shuttered website, Welcome to Video, has been described as the largest child pornography site discovered to date and explicitly only allowed users to upload child pornography. It contained more than [250,000 unique videos](#) and is estimated to have distributed over a million videos.

The dark web was [originally conceived](#) in the 1990s as an encrypted and anonymized network inaccessible by ordinary internet users that would allow for sensitive communications between U.S. spies. While that initial vision didn't come to fruition, there was hope that it could provide human rights activists and others an anonymous means of communications — particularly those who face monitored

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communications in authoritarian states. But it

has also become a source of criminal activity, especially with the advent of means of payment outside of the control of national governments in the form of cryptocurrency.

While the dark web allowed Welcome to Video to remain hidden away from most internet users, this case has prompted a wider investigation in South Korea as the website was run by South Korean Jong Woo Son and [two-thirds of the suspects](#) were South Koreans.

According to the U.S. based National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, incidents of child pornography on the web have grown significantly in recent years to over 18.4 million images in 2018. Sites that exploit children tend to operate in countries that have [laxer laws](#) and weaker monitoring mechanisms for child pornography and sexual abuse. While South Korea's penalties for the production of child pornography are in line with international standards, the penalties for possession are not.

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In the specific case of site owner Jong Woo Son, he was only sentenced to [18 months in prison](#).

Many of the convicted South Korean users of the website only received fines of a few thousand dollars. In contrast, the U.S. Department of Justice noted that [several individuals](#) are already serving sentences of 15 years or more from the current sting. Jong does face charges in the United States and potential extradition.

This is not out of the norm in South Korea, where 75 percent of those convicted of child sex abuse-related crimes who serve jail time serve less than five years in prison. In contrast, in the

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United States nearly 75 percent of those

convicted of possessing child pornography serve sentences of [5 years or more](#).

In the case of child pornography, one step South Korea is taking is increasing penalties. The National Assembly is working to raise the [criminal penalties](#) related to child pornography, while the Moon administration has asked the South Korean Supreme Court to issue sentencing guidelines to prevent offenders from receiving lesser sentences.

The challenge of dealing with criminal activity on the dark web, however, extends beyond tackling child pornography. While not all users on the dark web are engaged in criminal activity, South Korea has seen the use of the dark web grow at a faster rate than the global average with daily users tripling since 2016 to an [average of 15,591](#). Sites both within and outside South Korea are transacting in South Korean credit card information, machines to skim credit card information, counterfeit South Korean currency, and hacking programs. Credit card information can be purchased for as little as \$20.

Purchases of illegal drugs are also moving online, conducted on the [dark web](#) and via secure messaging apps such as Telegram. Purchases of [illegal drugs online](#) now account for 21.1 percent of all uncovered drug transactions and are up from 12.4 percent in 2017.

To address these challenges South Korea is [boosting investigations](#) into the dark web. Previously, investigations on the dark web were limited to a six-member team at the National Police Agency. Investigations will now be handled in by the National Police Agency in

conjunction with regional police authorities to increase investigative capacity, though largely focused on child pornography. It will also be increasing cooperation with international investigative authorities into dark web crimes related to the sale of personal information and drug trafficking, in addition to child pornography.

These are important initial steps for dealing with the challenge illegal activity on the dark web. While the initial focus on dealing with child pornography is understandable due to the Welcome to Video case, in time South Korea will also need to expand its focus beyond child pornography to deal with illegal drug trade, the sale of credit and personal information, and counterfeit currency.

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